
Sergius Bulgakov (1871–1944) is widely regarded as the twentieth century’s leading Orthodox theologian. In 1917 he published *Unfading Light*, an essential work of Russian religious philosophy that is now available in English translation for the first time. Thomas Allan Smith’s edition is superb. The translation is accurate throughout and the prose lucid. His introduction places the treatise in the context of Bulgakov’s life and thought. He has provided a bibliography of Bulgakov’s sources, carefully annotated the
text, and supplemented Bulgakov's copious notes. To have rendered this fundamental work into an eminently useful, authoritative edition in English is a major contribution that will long enrich the study of Russian religious philosophy and Orthodox theology.

The book contains a short preface from the author, a lengthy introduction on the nature of religious consciousness, and three main parts: "Divine Nothing," "The World," and "The Human Being." The overarching theme is that the basis of religion is human experience of the divine. Abstract thought and theory can follow from but not replace religious experience, which remains, Bulgakov writes, "the sole path for real, living comprehension of God" (18). The very possibility of experiencing the transcendent God in immanent reality is a mystery that he deeply felt and one that inspires his book from beginning to end.

The transcendent-immanent distinction is difficult to preserve. Human beings tend in one direction or the other: either to make the transcendent everything, to dissolve the immanent into it and thus to devalue the world, or else to collapse the transcendent into the immanent, resulting in the loss of authentic experience of the divine and its reduction to mere ideas or concepts. Bulgakov thought the second tendency was more widespread and the greater danger. Writing in the midst of the Great War, he associated immanentism with the "Germanic ethos" and its false deifications of humanity. Yet he acknowledged that the first tendency, world-denial for the sake of the transcendent, had certain manifestations in Russian religious consciousness. His hope was to "unite the truth of the one and the other" and "in lived experience to know God in the world and the world in God" (xlii).

The introduction is an indispensable guide to Bulgakov's whole approach to religion. He emphasizes that religious experience is utterly authoritative, immediately credible, and convincing "by a different higher persuasiveness than the facts of external reality." (17). Though it can be indisputably convincing, faith is not knowledge. Bulgakov connects this difference to what it means to be a person. In contrast to empirical knowledge, faith comes from within and depends on human freedom. "To impose the truths of faith from the outside," he writes, "would not meet the fundamental requirements of religious consciousness; to coerce our person, whether by logical constraint or force of knowledge, would not correspond to the dignity of the Divinity who respects our freedom" (29).

The content of faith is transcendent reality, which is not given as an object but posed as an ideal. "It is identified not by the coercion of external senses, not violently, but by the free, creative aspiration of the spirit, by the quest for God... In other words the element of freedom and personhood, i.e., creativity, is irremovable from religious faith" (35). Any radical immanentism (Hegelianism is Bulgakov's example) that eliminates the transcendent also erases the distinction between faith and knowledge and hence undermines the very foundations of personhood.

Transcendent and immanent form Bulgakov's most basic binary. Another is concrete and abstract, the first term one of approval for religious experience and faith, the second term one of reproach for rarefied intellectual constructs. Immediate, concrete religious experience is expressed in symbolic and conceptual forms (myth and dogma). Philosophy, by contrast, is abstract because its source is human reason. Nonetheless, it can be consciously grounded in religion (faith, myth, dogma) and freely pursue the philosophical deepening and development of concrete religious truth. That is Bulgakov's conception of religious philosophy. When it is not so grounded, philosophy risks closing itself off into pure immanentism and imagining itself to be the absolute, as in the "Luciferian ecstasy" of Hegelianism (89).

The first main part of the book is largely a history of apophatic or negative theology from Plato to Kant. The fundamental antimony of religious consciousness, the experience of the transcendent God in immanent reality, reveals the insufficiency of the powers of
human reason. Thus theology must be apophatic, or at least start out that way. Bulgakov uses a paradoxical formulation to explain how religion, and even kataphatic or positive theology, is possible: while in itself the Absolure is an unknowable, ineffable mystery, it reveals itself as God for us.

The second part of the book is a profound exposition of the idea of creation. Bulgakov held that the creation of the world was a free act of divine love-humility: love for created being, for the other, and humility because God respects the other’s freedom and dignity. He defended the doctrine of creation ex nihilo, elucidating it at length. It is a necessary element of his (Augustinian) conception of evil as the privation of being, indeed as the wilful and “unwarranted actualization of that nothing out of which the world is created. The Maker appointed to this nothing the status of a dark foundation ... the reverse and obverse of being, but eternally freedom is at liberty to summon to being even non-being” (270). If evil is the actualization of nothing, then good is the realization of the fullness of being, according to God’s eternal idea of creation. That brings us to Bulgakov’s signature concept of Holy Sophia: the divine wisdom and love by which God created the world, and also the ideal by which humanity continues his creative work. Sophia is God’s idea; foundation or conception of the world, its essence, norm, or soul. Beauty is the supreme way that Sophia is revealed in the world, and art is the supreme way that human beings work to transfigure the world in her image. Bulgakov’s Sophianic conception of beauty and transfiguration (spiritualized corporeality) fills some of the most luminous, even mystically inspired, pages of the book.

In the last and longest part of the book, Bulgakov further develops key aspects of his theological anthropology. The essential framework is Genesis 1:26: “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.” The “image of God” means that the human being is deiform in nature and capable of divinization (286). The image is given but the likeness is a task that we must realize by our own efforts, aided by grace: divinization is a joint divine-human project. (Bulgakov’s “image and likeness” theology has a long lineage, dating back to the patristic period, especially in the Byzantine East. It received further development in the Renaissance and was powerfully advanced by Bulgakov’s Russian master, Vladimir Soloviev.) Our ability to assimilate to the divine likeness was impaired by the fall but restored by Christ. Human history—the subject of Bulakov’s last several chapters—was renewed as a Sophianic creative activity to transfigure immanent reality, so that God may be all in all (1 Cor 15:28).

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